

Letters

Give Gorbachev Benefit of Doubt on Lithuania

To the Editor:

"Lithuania Is Not Tiananmen Square" (editorial, April 8) correctly notes major differences between the two that justify the Bush Administration's restraint in dealing with President Mikhail S. Gorbachev on the Lithuanian issue.

There are other reasons to approve of Mr. Bush's prudent posture. I believe I am the only political scientist to have written about secession as a political issue in the last 50 years. In "Heresies Right and Left" (New York, 1973) I wrote that a proposed secession should require a referendum by the would-be seceders and that "Perhaps more than a majority should be required for an act as grave as the division of an established nation-state. . . . A secession movement should be able to attract consistent support for a period of at least 5 or 10 years before it could establish its legitimacy. This would enable the government of a troubled nation-state, e.g., to propose a federalist solution . . . the parent state should be given a final opportunity to seek a political solution to the controversy.

"Five or 10 years . . . would also give the restive population an opportunity to be confronted with and to deliberate upon the possible economic losses and political difficulties that would accompany secession . . . if the view could gain ground that it is immoral to crush secessionist movements by force . . . a great advance would be made."

As those who have followed the Lithuanian issue closely will recognize, Mr. Gorbachev (who of course never saw the book) has adhered with astonishing fidelity to its principles.

He has proposed that Lithuania should not secede unless a two-thirds majority ratifies such action. He has called for a five-year waiting period before any secession became legal. He has indicated a desire to work out a quasi-federalist solution. And he is trying to avoid bloodshed and use military force as sparingly as possible. Quite remarkable.

But there is a further reason not to be overharsh on Mr. Gorbachev for not permitting an easy breakaway by the Baltic states, a breakaway that could trigger a rash of secession demands that could jeopardize not only his political power but also the democratic reforms he seeks to make.

Mr. Gorbachev has probably made greater contributions to the well-being of humankind than any other political figure in history. Hyperbole? Consider this: Ending the cold war, reversing the arms race, liberating Eastern Europe, introducing democratic and economic reforms in the Soviet Union as rapidly as feasible, withdrawing from Afghanistan and from most of the Soviet international mischief-making of recent decades, and changing the political atmosphere for the better constitute unparalleled achievements. I can think of no statesman in history to have done so much.

Such a man deserves the benefit of the doubt on difficult issues like Lithuania.

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Oxford, Ohio, April 16, 1990

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Forcibly Occupied

To the Editor:

Victor Danilenko ("Vilnius: Its Own Worst Enemy," Op-Ed, April 17) has missed the point concerning tensions between the Soviet Union and the Republic of Lithuania. While Mr. Danilenko presents himself as an objective exponent of Soviet law, such law holds no actual or perceived obligations for the people of Lithuania, as Lithuania has never voluntarily (or otherwise) joined the Soviet Union.

Lithuania, along with Latvia and Estonia, was forcibly occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940 as a consequence of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Parliamentary elections (not referendums) were held in all three countries in July. The results were published in The Times of London before the polls officially closed. These puppet parliaments sued for admission into the Soviet Union and were officially annexed in early August.

Lithuanians are not trying to establish their independence from the Soviet Union, but to re-establish an independence taken from them by the Soviet Union in 1940. The forcible incorporation of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia has not in 50 years been recognized by the United States or by more than 30 other countries.

That perestroika and Soviet reform in general are in peril is obvious. However, the party responsible for this sits in Moscow. All that Lithuanians want (Latvians and Estonians too) is to achieve the logical goal of any effort by a Soviet government truly intent on putting its own house in order: the end of an illegal occupation about which the Soviet Union's most eminent legal scholars still cannot speak the truth.

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Rockville, Md., April 19, 1990

Ancient Declensions

To the Editor:

John V. Chervokas's thumbnail description of the Lithuanian language ("Vilnius to Moscow: Pasisvilpk," Op-Ed, April 10) — "may be the world's oldest spoken language . . . many of its words having a kinship with Sanskrit" — requires a great deal of clarification.

Lithuanian is descended from the prehistoric language referred to by scholars as Proto-Indo-European, which was spoken in more or less unitary form — probably somewhere in Eastern Europe — until about 3,000 B.C. and was then carried by migration to most of Europe and large parts of Asia. As an Indo-European language, Lithuanian is related not only to Sanskrit but also to English, German, Russian, Latin, Greek, Irish, Welsh, Albanian, Persian and Armenian, among others. This is graphically demonstrated by cognate words. For example: English "night," Lithuanian "naktis," Sanskrit "nakt-," German "Nacht," Russian "noch," Latin "noct-," Greek "nukt-," Irish "anocht" (tonight).

To call Lithuanian "the world's oldest spoken language" is not a meaningful statement. Lithuanian belongs to the Baltic branch of Indo-European, just as English and German belong to the Germanic branch, Russian to the Slavic, and Irish and Welsh to the Celtic, and as a separate language it is probably no older than any of those.

It does, however, have certain features — specifically, its noun and adjective declensions — which are so archaic that they seem hardly to have changed since Proto-Indo-European times, and it is for that reason the only living language that regularly takes its place alongside Sanskrit, Latin, ancient Greek, Gothic, Old English and Old Church Slavonic in the comparative studies of Indo-European scholars.

However, for a language that is spoken in a tiny country along the Baltic Sea, that may well be distinction enough.

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New York, April 10, 1990

The writer is the author of "A Dictionary of Slavic Word Families" (New York, 1975).